

ORGANIC FARMING: A SOLUTION TO AGRICULTURE CRISIS OR A "NEW" TREND TO HEALTHY EATING? AN OVERVIEW OF FRENCH AND BRITISH FARMERS

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Abstract

Organic Farming: A Solution to Agriculture Crisis or a "New" Trend to Healthy Eating? An Overview of French and British Farmers

In recent years, the market for organic farming has significantly increased in response to concerns over food quality and environmental matters. Organic food is quite attractive for consumers and is often associated to quality, healthy and natural products in opposition to the more processed and artificial conventional food. Yet, farmers are less enthusiastic about this concept. This paper, issued from a survey with dairy farmers in two dairy areas in France (January 2000) and the UK (July 2002), review farmers attitude towards organic farming. Only a minority of farmers were in favour of organic farming while the others had concerns about organic farming as its concept goes against their belief: a farmer must produce food for the nation.

Key words

farm diversification, pluriactivity, organic agriculture, dairying

1. Introduction

Organic farming is a growing subject in European agriculture. As the concern for food quality and agro-ecology deepens, the philosophy and practice of organic farming have taken on new and greater importance in European agriculture. Scofield (1986, 5) stresses that organic farming does not simply refer to the use of living materials, but emphasises the concept of "wholeness", implying the "systematic connexion or co-ordination of parts in one whole". A definition of organic farming provided by Lampkin (1994, 5) states that the aim is "to create integrated, humane, environmentally and economically sustainable production systems, which maximise reliance on farm-derived renewable resources and the management of ecological and biological processes and interactions, so as to provide acceptable levels of crop, livestock and human nutrition, protection from pests and disease, and an appropriate return to the human and other resources". MacCormack (1995) notes unlike "sustainable" farming practices, organic farming practices are well-defined - in fact, organic farming practices are unique, for they are the only ones codified as law. Despite the variety of definitions of organic farming, the general agreements regarding what is necessary to produce organically are in stark contrast to the debates and arguments that rage regarding the nature of agricultural sustainability. However, as Ikerd (1993, 30) notes, "mention *sustainable agriculture* and many people will think you are talking about organic farming. Some organic farmers will agree. They think that organic farming is the only system that can sustain agricultural production over the long run".

In recent years, the market for organic food has increased. According to the literature, health is the primary reasons for consumers to purchase organic goods (Bordeleau et al 2002; Sirieix et al 2007; Zakowska-Biemans 2007) even though safety (Roitner-Schobesberger et al 2008), quality and taste (Magnusson et al 2003; Hughner et al 2007; Brandt 2007; Soil Association 2009) are very important motivations for buying organic food. Indeed, eating pleasure (particularly *tastiness*) is now the main argument in marketing and promoting organic foods, followed by health and then environmental benefits (Reed 2009). Surprisingly, consumers appear to be relatively unaware of the beneficial impact that organic agriculture has on the environment (Hughner et al 2007; Sirieix et al 2007).

Finally, it is worth noting that the motivation of occasional organic shopper to buy organic food is curiosity and also the nostalgic association of organic produce with the genuineness and reminiscence taste of the past (Hughner et al 2007). However, the lack of availability of organic food (Lea and Worsley 2008) and, above all, its higher price are often a strong barrier to the purchase of organic food (Hughner et al 2007). Moreover, the lack of knowledge or information on the meaning of organic food (Briz and Ward 2009) as well as the different ways to label organic products (Sirieix et al. 2007) leads consumers to question the genuineness of organic products and to distrust certification bodies and organic food labels (Zakowska-Biemans 2005; Soares et al 2008).

Although the idea of organic farming seems quite appealing for consumers, farmers are less enthusiastic about the concept. Only a minority of farmers, especially in dairy areas, is in favour of organic farming. Based on evidence from French and British dairy farmers, this paper reviews the attitude of dairy farmers towards organic farming

2. Methodology

In order to meet the aims of the research, a multi-method analysis using both quantitative and qualitative method was developed. Questionnaires provided a base for analysis on organic farming and then allowed the researcher to focus on particular aspects of organic farming using in-depth interviews. A total of 398 farms have been surveyed and 30 farmers have been interviewed. By using an in-depth approach to the study of farm households, a more complete understanding of farmers' behaviour, farming culture and farmers' experiences has been reached. This paper refers only to the findings from the in-depth interviews.

3. Organic farming in the EU

There are substantial differences between the individual countries regarding the importance of organic farming. In Europe, organic farming is getting more important but there are differences between "old" and "new" European countries as well as differences between northern and southern Europe (European Commission, 2005). European organic farms have particular characteristics: the average size is much higher compared to conventional farms, which may reduce the required labour per area (European Commission, 2005). The number of holding has increase in many EU countries but it has not reached the target set out by some national government, especially France and the UK (10 to 20% areas under organic farming by 2010). In France, organic area represent 2.5% of the total area and the average French organic holding is 49.2 ha (European Commission, 2005). French organic market is regulated by the French Ministry of Agriculture's "AB" (*Agriculture Biologique*) official logo which is certified by one of the three French agencies: Ecocert, Qualité France and Ascert International.

According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the total area of organic land an in-conversion land represent 4% of the total agricultural area in the UK (DEFRA, 2009). The Soil Association reports that the introduction of the Single Payment Scheme (SPS) has resulted in a growth of interest in organic conversion of all sectors. In 2004, the retail market for organic products in the UK was worth an estimated £1.2 billion demonstrating continued and sustained growth cross the sector (DEFRA, 2009). Sales of organic produce through direct marketing and alternative markets such as box schemes and independent shop retail increased considerably (Soil Association, 2009). Consequently the supermarket share of the organic market fell for the third consecutive year.

Many farmers see the opportunity to organic produce in the market and are interesting in switching from conventional to organic because the price organic products. As a general rule, organic products receive a higher price than conventional products, but prices diverge depending on the country and on the product. Survey results show that in some cases price premiums for organic products, i.e. the relative price difference between organic and conventional products, are lower for consumer prices than for farmer prices (milk, eggs, potatoes), but the opposite is true for other products (wheat, apples, pork, beef). In 2003, organic production in Europe was not sufficient and most of organic products had to be imported (European Commission, 2005). If the competitive market place is to deliver significant financial encouragement to organic farmers in the EU, then organic foods need to be made more easily available to all consumers,

and aggregate consumer demand needs to continue to outpace supplies. And, whilst higher production costs in some countries that export organic foods to the EU may auger well for EU farmers, without consumer demand matching supply, or a significant increase in state subsidies, individual organic producers and organic subsectors could well be facing the imminence of a ceiling in organic production. The organic food sector may be starting to experience similar levels of inelasticity in demand as those operating in the conventional sector. As a consequence, any policy emphasis on the retailing end of the organic supply chain will need to recognise the dominant role that supermarkets play in encouraging organic production on the one hand and, on the other, how they tend to meet consumer demands through a combination of imports and downward pressure on farm-gate prices (Willer and Yussefi 2001). The growth in consumer demand for environmentally friendly, "green" or chemical-free food products has led to an expansion in Europe and North America of organic registration schemes.

The concept of organic farming is often misunderstood and misinterpreted and many farmers believe that organic farming relates more to fruits and vegetable and less to herd, especially dairy. According to Marsden et al (2002), farmers start out as organic producers or convert to organic techniques for a variety of reasons, including: concerns about their family's health; concerns about husbandry (e.g. soil degradation, animal welfare); lifestyle choice (ideological, philosophical, religious); and financial considerations. Moreover, the research also identified a series of barriers which impede on the number of farmers converting to organic farming: perceptions (the image of organic farmers; the size of the market); access to technical and financial information; institutional barriers (problems in getting loans, certification constraints); and social barriers (particularly in tight knit communities). The most common specific factor identified as prompting the ending of organic production was the unavailability of "market outlets" while "lack of technical experience" and the costs associated with organic "inspection" and also "investment" were commonly identified (Rigby, Young and Burton 2001). The next section of the paper presents the views of dairy farmers on organic farming which is part of diversification in France and the UK.

4. Farmers' attitude towards organic farming in France and the UK

There is a growing international concern towards the conservation of the rural environment. Pressure groups are beginning to influence policy decisions and have helped to promote a wider interest in healthy, often organic, food. Specialist markets for both new and traditional products are emerging and farmers are well placed to exploit such opportunities (Ilbery 1998). Organic farms are much less intensive - in terms of input of non-renewable resources - than traditional farms, so organic production may help to recreate a balanced market. Organic conversion is growing in importance partly in response to concerns involved with food quality. However, consumers require quality at reasonable prices which is often in contradiction to organic foods as they currently command high prices.

Furthermore, a study of farmers' attitude towards diversification reveals that farmers are not in favours of organic production for several reasons explained below. The main reason for farmers not to diversify towards agricultural diversification via organic farming is that, although organic produce is sold at higher prices in supermarkets, farmers say it is not viable for them due to various constraints attached including the need to meet stringent regulations.

4.1 Price

Only little and partial information is available on prices for organic products. The main barrier to convert to organic farming is the conversion period, which according to farmers is too long and the premium too little. Hence, farmers feel organic farming would not be profitable as they would not survive the conversion period: "If I convert to organic farming, the conversion period lasts two years. During that time, milk will get paid at the normal price while production cost will be higher" (French farmer). Furthermore, farmers argued that organic prices are not guaranteed to be higher than conventional prices so organic farming is too risky for them.

For many, organic farming relates the farm characteristics as there are quite a few constraints to follow: "There are far too many constraints with organic farming, furthermore, it is not guaranteed that organic produce sell better. Logbooks are too complicated and they should be made easier and prices should be higher" (French farmer). Furthermore organic farming is believed to be less productive, and this is often associated to farmers mind as bad farming.

The issue of higher costs and insufficient premiums was exacerbated in the opinion of several farmers by the absence of suitable incentives not only to convert to organic production, but also to maintain such systems. Farmers are not willing to produce organic food as they claim they do not get enough money for it. The premium was quite attractive but nowadays the market for organic produce is not as important as expected and farmers know that consumers mainly look at the prices of products while shopping: "Only a minority of people can afford organic food as the price is much higher than conventional food ... the food budget has decreased" (French farmer)

The role of the supermarkets is crucial in the development of organic farming as supermarket, to some extent, control the market. Because of the role of the supermarket in food price regulation, farmers argue that organic farming will never become a major part of farming: "The problem is the supermarkets, price is acceptable if organic products are sold as *vente directe* then farmers are more likely to have a large share of the benefit" (French farmer). Other farmers argue that there is no point becoming organic farmers as organic produce can be produce at a lower cost from other countries so supermarkets can import cheaper organic produce than either French or British farmers can produce.

4.2 Market insecurity

For many farmers, organic farming is not an option as there is a lack of market opportunity. Organic produce are more expensive compared to traditional food stuff and only a minority of people can afford to purchase these products. As such, many farmers believe that intensive farming has still its place in the market as it produce food for the masses. Farmers also insisted that if everyone engages in organic farming, then there won't be anything special about it, prices would decrease and there would be no profits: "If everybody becomes organic farmer, it will become banal and price will be lowered" (French farmer). Other believes that organic farming will suffer the same fate as intensive farming if too many farmers become organic farmers. Farmers maintain that the number of organic farmers should be controlled: "If more farmers become organic, the market will be flooded with organic produce; there should not be more than one or two organic farmers per

district" (French farmer).

In dairy areas, like Manche and Dorset, organic milk collection is often very difficult. Milk collectors do not always want to collect farmers' organic milk if the farm is too far away from the main collection route as it is not cost effective. Farmers argue that because of the lack of organic dairying and the general lack of demand, they could end up selling their milk as organic milk price some part of the week and the rest as traditional milk price, so financially it is not worthwhile: "The problem was to find a dairy firm willing to come and collect organic milk. There was an organic dairy firm near Caen, but unless I got more farmers from the area to produce organic milk, they would not come and collect the milk" (French farmer).

4.3 Quality

Farmers now are aware that it is important to produce quality food via certification if possible. According to Ilbery and Kneafsey (2000), the concept of quality is one which is contested, constructed and represented differently by diverse actors operating within a variety of regulatory and market arenas. Food safety issues have been taken into consideration due to the anxiety about Salmonella and Listeria, the presence of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and E. Coli and more recently worries over genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Nowadays, the public has become more aware of the ethical and environmental implications of intensive farming systems and the trend is towards "healthy eating". Consumers are increasingly concerned about the origin and method of production of food stuff, not only for "health" and "safety" reasons, but also in terms of satisfying a current "nostalgia" which takes them back to a time of "real" and "wholesome" foods (Gilg and Battershill 1998).

For many farmers, as well as for the general public, organic production is either simply conventional production minus chemical inputs, or even just 'allowing nature to do its work'. For the farmers, this failure to grasp the labour and management of the nature of organic farming creates problems and some farmers argued that "organic farming is too much work" (French farmer). Even amongst those producers with a better grasp of the realities of organic production, there were problems regarding the availability of practically orientated information and advice. In both study area, the lack of information regarding organic farming and its benefits add confusion the concept of organic produce. Farmers are sometimes unsure about what the general public wants in terms of quality. Farmers argue that they have never produced better quality products and they nowadays also have to register their farming practices into a logbook: "Usually quality according to some people goes hand in hand with organic farming. I am not convinced it is right. We cannot not produce quality product as we would not be able to sell our product" (British farmer). This suggested the importance of information regarding organic farming to both the consumer and the producer. Informal networks for farmers regarding information, advice on the practicalities of production, marketing strategies should therefore be developed to encourage the switch from conventional to organic. Liaisons with consumer associations, educational service would also provide a better understanding.

4.4 Farmers' culture

For many farmers, organic farming is a contradiction to the farmer's role in society:

producing food to feed the nation. Food shortage and rationing from post-war are still present in many farmers mind, especially older farmers. Most believe that if too many farmers engage in organic farming, there will be a shortage of food: "In this country if we all go organic we would not produce enough to feed every body. It comes back to you as a round circle." (British farmer). Farmers see organic farming as an old-fashioned way of farming and it seems to them contradictory to what they have been taught: "...We cannot work the same way our grandparents did." (French farmer). Furthermore, some farmers also stated that organic farming is not a good farming practice: "I don't think it is a good way to farm" (British farmer).

A British argued that organic farming is nothing new and refer to farming practice from post WWII: "Organic is the way we used to farm 60-70 years ago, no fertilisers or pesticides and everything. There is nothing particularly new about that" (British farmer). Farmers accept that they have to move away from intensive farming, for many organic farming is not the solution and many are more in favour of sustainable farming: "Organic farming, absolutely not! I am in favour of sustainable farming but not organic farming. There are far too many constraints. Between intensification and organic farming there is a right middle" (French farmer). Organic farmers are usually seen as "green" farmers and marginal farmers and consequently they are not regarded positively by the farming community: "No, I'm not interested in organic farming. I do not have the philosophy for that. Whoever engages in organic farming has to believe in it. You should see these people's mentality." (French farmer).

Farmers from both study areas argued that organic farmers are not competitive with other farmers as the outputs are lower for organic farming. One farmer in Dorset argued that whatever is done to reduce production such as set-aside, organic farming, and the production would not be reduced that much because of the progress in science and genetic engineering. Furthermore they argued that organic farmers are not as competitive as 'intensive' farms so when the price of the milk for example will be based on the world market prices, organic farmers will not be able to compete: "It is not a productive agriculture" (French farmer).

5. Conclusion

The paper review farmers' attitude towards organic farming in two dairy areas. Organic farming constitutes a small part of farming and many farmers have different reasons to engage or not in organic farming. Organic farming has not yet entered farmers' perception of farming but the future change of EU agricultural policy may encourage more farmers to become organic farmers. However, unless organic farming is more regulated, the organic food sector need to be controlled otherwise it may experience similar levels of inelasticity in demand as those operating in the conventional sector and Hall and Mogyordoy (2001, 399) argued that "organic farming may become a slightly modified version of modern conventional agriculture, replicating the same history, resulting in many of the same basic social, technical and economic characteristics – smaller farms become bigger, debt loads increase with increasing capital intensification, labour is replaced by mechanisation and other industrial inputs, and marketing becomes export-orientated rather than local". It is therefore important for research to look into changing policies regarding organic farming and future work looking at the social correlation to organic farming from the farmers and not the consumers' point of view

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Summary

The McSharry reforms (1992) issues from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) led to the widespread implementation of agri-environment measures. Since then, voluntary agri-environment schemes (AESs) have become a key policy instrument for considering and enhancing the environment. As such, some farmers have decided to adapt their farming practice by adopting organic farming.

In recent years, the market for organic produce has increased due to health, food quality and to a lesser extent environmental concerns. However, organic production is not enough to meet the increasing demand for organic products. A survey of French and British dairy farmers reveals the reasons behind the lack of motivation to become an organic farmer:

- ∞ Misunderstanding of the concept of organic farming.
- ∞ Conversion period is the main barrier to organic farming: farmers argue it is too long, the premium are too little and there are too many constraints
- ∞ Organic prices are not guaranteed to be higher than conventional prices.
- ∞ Role of the supermarkets in food price regulation: the development of organic farming is limited as supermarkets, to some extent, control the market.
- ∞ Production costs: organic food stuff can be produce cheaper in other country and then imported, therefore limiting the scope for increasing EU organic production.
- ∞ Farming culture: Some farmers also stated that organic farming is not a good farming practice, it is a contradiction to the farmer's role in society: producing food to feed the nation.
- ∞ Lack of market opportunity: in dairy areas, like Manche and Dorset, organic milk collection is often very difficult as milk collectors do not always wish to come and collect farmers' organic milk if the farm is too far away from the main collection route as it is not cost effective for organic dairying
- ∞ Food shortage and rationing from post-war is still present in many farmers mind, especially older farmers.
- ∞ Old fashioned: for farmers, organic farming is an old-fashioned way of farming and it seems to them contradictory to what they have been taught.
- ∞ Future: Farmers believe that organic farming will suffer the same fate as intensive farming if too many farmers become organic farmers.

To conclude, organic farming constitutes a small part of farming and many farmers have different reasons to engage or not in organic farming. Organic farming has not yet entered farmers' perception of farming but the future change of EU agricultural policy may encourage more farmers to become organic farmers. However, unless organic farming is regulated, the organic food sector need to be controlled otherwise it may experience similar levels of inelasticity in demand as those operating in the conventional sector. It is therefore important for research to look into changing policies regarding organic farming and future work looking at the social correlation to organic farming from the farmers and not the consumers' point of view.